

Societal questions

1. The basics

Abortion: the voluntary termination of pregnancy by removing a fetus or embryo from a mother's womb before it can survive. It is legal in the UK (Northern Ireland excepted), in the US (with more or less discouraging restrictions in 31 states), in Canada (legal under any circumstances and at all stages of pregnancy), and in Australia (carried out with restrictions depending on each state's laws). It is illegal in Ireland but can be performed to save the life of the mother.

The death penalty: legal punishment by death (also called "capital punishment"); still enforced in many countries, including the US, where it is legal under federal and state laws in 31 states.

Assisted suicide: suicide of a terminally-ill patient or a patient with an incurable condition, carried out with the assistance of another person, most of the time through the taking of lethal drugs provided by a doctor for that purpose.

Marijuana legalisation: the fact of allowing the use of medical and/or recreational marijuana.

2. The debates

| | Pros | Cons |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| Abortion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -It is deemed a human right and a woman's right to have control over their body. -If the fetus is not viable outside the womb, it should not be regarded as a human being. -In cases of rape or incest, a woman should not be forced to keep an unwanted child. -It costs less than a life imprisonment. -It acts as a deterrent for would-be criminals. -Abolition would inevitably make the crime rate increase. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Since life begins at conception, it is similar to murder and fetal rights matter. -Only God can take a life. -Causes psychological pain and stress. -In cases of rape or incest, it is not the fetus that should be punished. -It denies the rights to life and to live free from torture, which are stated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. -Miscarriages of justice happen but a life sentence is irreversible. |
| The death penalty | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -It does not violate the 8th Amendment (preventing the federal state from imposing torture) as more humane execution methods are used. -It is a punishment deserved by the culprit. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Some activist groups fight against it, either locally or globally, as it goes against human rights and is degrading. -There are cases of botched executions. |
| Assisted suicide | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -It should be a fundamental right to decide when we die if death is approaching. -No one should be forced to go through suffering without a right to end that pain. -Everyone should be allowed to die with dignity. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -It raises ethical concerns: no one is entitled to end someone else's life, and abuse and mistakes are feared. -Palliative care has improved and terminally-ill patients can die with dignity. |
| Marijuana legalisation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Governments can derive revenue from legalisation through taxation. -It allows the authorities to keep track of the amount of cannabis in circulation. -It would entail a decrease in price due to mass production and increased consumption. -It would boost competition and create jobs. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -It would increase the availability and use of substances that are deemed dangerous. -It would pose health and safety risks. -Increase in tax revenue could be outweighed by the economic costs (soaring health costs, loss of productivity in the workplace). -The black market would not disappear. |

Facts and figures

1. Landmark legislations in the UK

a. Abortion

1967: Abortion Act (made the UK one of the first European countries to legalise it, with the exception of Northern Ireland; the legal limit was reduced from 28 to 24 weeks with the **Abortion Act of 1988**); **2016:** was declared a human right by the UN, reigniting debates in Northern Ireland.

completely abolished in 1998, although it had not been used since 1964.

b. The death penalty

c. Assisted suicide

1961: under the **Suicide Act of 1961**, both euthanasia and assisted suicide are illegal in the UK, although there is a push to make it legal under certain circumstances; **2012:** the UK Supreme Court defeated the case of Tony Nicklinson, who suffered from locked-in syndrome after a stroke.

d. Marijuana

legalisation

1928: cannabis was declared illegal but doctors were allowed to prescribe it to ill patients until 1971; **1971:** **Misuse of Drugs Act** (created Class A, B and C classification systems as a means to control drug use; cannabis was then classified as a Class B drug and still is, despite several attempts to make it a Class C drug); **November 2016:** legalisation in California reignited the debate in the UK over fears the UK might be falling behind the US, Germany (about to legalise medical use) and Canada (planning to legalise it for recreational purposes in 2017).

2. Landmark legislation in the US

a. Abortion

1973: Roe vs. Wade (the landmark Supreme Court ruling that made abortion legal under the 14th Amendment to the US Constitution); **1992:** Planned Parenthood vs. Casey (a Supreme Court decision that invalidated some restrictions imposed on women seeking to abort). **1972:** Furman vs. Georgia (the Supreme Court strikes it down as unconstitutional and suspends it across the US); **1976:** Gregg vs. Georgia (the Supreme Court reaffirms its constitutionality and the death penalty is reinstated).

b. The death penalty

c. Assisted suicide

1994: Oregon was the 1st US state to allow physician-assisted suicide. Washington (**2008**), Montana (**2009**), Vermont (**2013**), California (**2015**) and Colorado (**2016**) followed suit.

d. Marijuana

legalisation

1996: **California** was the 1st US state to legalise medical cannabis; so far, 26 states and DC have allowed medical use, though it is still considered a drug under federal law; **2012:** **Colorado** and **Washington** legalised recreational use; **2016:** **California** made recreational use legal.